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ABSTRACT

The educational reform movement has helped bring the principalship into new prominence. Among the forces affecting current attitudes toward the principalship are the effective schools literature, which has stressed the centrality of the principal's role; the anticipation of retirement by a large proportion of principals; the increased research on the principalship; analysis by principals of their own roles and responsibilities; the development of incentive pay programs for principals; and shifts in school governance toward state centralization and local district decentralization simultaneously. In response to these forces, local school boards and major national commissions are redefining the principal's role, and state legislation and federal policies are focusing on the principal's leadership functions. Principals can participate actively in the changes that are occurring by becoming experts in personnel evaluation, thinking in terms of results rather than activities, increasing cooperation between their schools and the community, developing new loyalty to public education, and improving their control of time, their priorities, and their goals. (PGD)

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PRINCIPALS: NEW FOCUS FOR REFORM

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PRINCIPALS: NEW FOCUS FOR REFORM

M. Donald Thomas and Charles Welch[1]

As the educational reform movement continues to intensify, more and more attention is being given to the principalship. Throughout the nation the study of principals has become a major concern of scholars, school board members, legislators, and principals themselves. Dissecting the principalship is the new reform activity in town. There are many reasons for this occurrence:

- The effective schools literature has propelled principals into an enhanced position of leadership and visibility.
- The demographics of people in the principalship necessitates an urgent need to train new principals for the many who are currently near retirement age.
- More and more scholars, researchers, and students of educational leadership are re-examining the duties and responsibilities of principals.
- Principals themselves are trying to make sense out of the many demands and contradictions which surround them.
- The pressures for merit pay programs for teachers are creating a similar influence for incentive pay programs for principals.
- The governance of education is moving into two directions at the same time - greater state control with greater reliance on individual school principals.

Principals need to understand what is happening, need to shape the educational reform efforts which effect their work, and need to develop strategies to lead effective and satisfying work lives. There is still time for principals to make significant contributions to the quality of life in our public schools.

In this paper, we will discuss three items:

1. The forces and events which are rapidly placing the principalship on center stage.
2. The legislative actions and policy decisions which are the forerunners of what will soon become commonplace for most principals.
3. Ways in which principals can control the demands and changes which confront them while at the same time enhance their position.

Forces Affecting the Principalship.

Today the principalship is the new kid on the block. Everyone involved in educational reform is studying the role of the principal and articulating what principals should and should not be. This condition has been created by a variety of forces. Let's discuss these forces in some detail.

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- The effective schools literature.

  Consensus is being rapidly established which supports the position that the effectiveness of schools is primarily determined by the leadership of the principal. Articles, reports, position papers, speeches all come to the same conclusion - the school principal determines, to a large extent, the success of the school. In addition, principals establish the quality of life enjoyed by both students and school employees.

  The importance of the principalship has become one of the correlates of an effective school. It states that achievement is related to the instructional leadership of the principal. As a result, principals are attempting to understand "instructional leadership" and are re-examining their priorities and the use of their time.

  The effective schools literature has thrust the principal into prominence without first establishing the responsibilities and obligations of that prominence. Instructional leadership needs clarification and supporting educational opportunities.

- Demographic trends.

  As a group, principals are becoming older. A large number are within striking distance of retirement - 5/10 years. Many are more concerned about their personal future than the future of their school. It is a concern which is appropriate and which needs to be appreciated. Most principals have modest financial security and retirement is a legitimate concern.

  Many of the current principals entered the teaching profession after World War II. That cohost produced the largest number of school administrators in our history. They have served well and now wish to enter retirement without excessive new responsibilities.

  The problem is that schools are being pounded by reform efforts - and to the reformers retirement is not a high priority. Thus, principals are placed in a difficult position of planning their personal lives and at the same time responding to the heavy demands of school reform.

- Research developments.

  Research related to the principalship presents a confusing mass of information. While some suggest that the principalship is an impossible task, others report extremely effective principals who enjoy their work and report very little stress. Some even suggest that the reporting of stress is so commonplace that it has lost any significant meaning. Others report that the majority of principals would gladly give up the job if they could find comparable paying work in another field.

Research also indicates that there is a variety of expectations placed on principals. Rarely are they given a specific set of responsibilities for which they are to be held accountable. Further, principals, themselves, feel that under collective bargaining, they are losing power and influence.

In such circumstances, it is important to appreciate that the principalship needs attention and that principals need assistance with their roles.

- Principal self-analysis.

Principals are trying to make sense out of the conflicting demands placed upon them. On the one hand, they are asked to improve standards and develop stronger discipline. On the other hand, they are told to become public relations specialists and market the schools. Principals see these two efforts as contradictory.

As they examine their work, principals believe that more is expected of them than they can perform. They need help with personnel evaluation, instructional leadership, delegation, and time management. They also need to have more autonomy, more control of funds, and increased ability to decide what goes on in their schools.

More than anything else, principals feel that they have insufficient resources to do a good job. They need increased secretarial help, assistance to free them from administration, and opportunities to learn new skills required for "instructional leadership."

- Incentive pay programs.

The pressure for teacher merit (incentive) pay programs is creating a similar demand for pay programs which provide incentives for effective principals. This pressure is particularly strong in state legislatures. It is also emanating from aggressive state boards of education.

Incentive pay programs require strong evaluatory systems if they are to be fairly implemented. Yet, there are few sophisticated and valid systems which evaluate principals. Most evaluation programs are carryovers of the past centuries which evaluate items not related to effective schools or effective leadership. There is a need to develop appropriate evaluation as a basis for incentive pay programs.

Incentive pay programs for principals will be established in parallel fashion to incentive pay programs for teachers. It appears that the pressure for such programs will not only continue, but it will intensify in the years to come. The handwriting is on the wall and it will soon be chiseled in stone.

- Governance of education.

  The governance of education is changing rapidly. More and more educational decisions are being made by state boards of education (New Jersey) or state legislatures (Tennessee, California, South Carolina). The centralization of educational decisions at the state level is seen as an effort to improve standards and establish greater accountability.

  At the same time, nearly everyone is saying that principals should have greater decision-making authority. Principals need to have greater control over personnel, resources, and decisions. Most people seem to agree that quality schools cannot be established without first staffing them with effective principals who are given freedom of action and extended authority to use resources as they believe to be appropriate.

  Thus, we have governance moving in two directions at the same time, often in contradiction to each other.

Legislative Action and Policy Decisions.

From local boards of education to the halls of legislative bodies, action is being taken which is rapidly changing the role of the principal. More importantly, a new image of the principal, as a more powerful leader, is clearly emerging. It is a role which needs to be understood and appreciated. Here is what is happening:

- Changing nature of local policies.

  Local school districts are relying more and more on principals. The literature, the discussions at conferences, and the frustrations of principals have influenced the actions of board members. Many school districts are adopting policies which define the role and expectations of principals.

  Local school boards are also reacting to increased pressures placed on principals by collective bargaining contracts. They are enacting policies to give principals greater control over personnel, increased ability to terminate incompetent employees, and providing them with larger amounts of discretionary funds.

  At the local level principals are becoming more important decision-makers by policy and by the expectations of parents. Local boards have been influenced by current trends and are responding favorably to enhancing the role of the principal.

- Recommendations of commissions.

  Every major study of public education has something to say about the principalship. Most agree that the principal is the key to effective school reform. Most also agree that the role of the principal needs to be re-defined, that principals need to concentrate on instruction, and that principal leadership is strongly related

to effective schools. Especially important is that most reports recognize that principals are asked to do more than can be reasonably expected of them.

Recommendations include the following:

1. Principals need to concentrate on instruction and personnel evaluation.

2. Principals need to act more like master teachers than like managers.

3. Principals need to set a climate for the school which provides quality and equity for all children.

4. Principals need to work effectively with staff, students, and parents.

- Legislative action.

Several legislative bodies have enacted legislation which affects principals. Of particular interest is The South Carolina Education Improvement Act of 1984. It contains several provisions which impact on principals. The law establishes the following:

1. An evaluation program for all principals. The program is to be developed and implemented over a three-year period.

2. An incentive pay program for all principals. It also shall be developed and implemented over a three-year period.

3. A school effectiveness program to make awards to schools which are deemed to be more effective than others.

4. An assessment program for all persons who wish to become principals. No individual can be appointed a principal without first going through the assessment program. Assessment is conducted by the State Department of Education.

- Policy decisions at the federal level.

At the federal level, there is a developing recognition that school leadership is the emerging problem of the 1990's. More and more interest is being shown in leadership training programs. Some members of Congress have suggested that federal support be given to training for school administrators. The American Association of School Administrators has attemped to pass such legislation with the help of members of Congress who support education and who appreciate the need for leadership training.

So far, however, no legislation has been passed in this area. It is believed by many, however, that such a bill can be passed and that it can be passed soon. Much will depend on the new Secretary

of Education who replaces Dr. Terrell H. Bell. Secretary Bell has been supportive of efforts to make educational leadership a national concern.

Strategies for Personal Control.

Principals have a choice. They can ignore what is happening and go gently into retirement or they can become a powerful force for improving our schools. Principals can examine history or suffer the consequences of ignoring it. The time appears ripe to principals to become not only the focus of reform but the new and aggressive leadership required by the reform movement. Here are some suggestions as to what principals can do to enhance their position:

- Become experts in personnel evaluation.

  More and more local boards of education are demanding better personnel evaluation from principals. This is a difficult assignment, but is one that must be completed. Historically, evaluation has not been done well. It is only within recent years that methods have been developed that evaluate school employees fairly.

  Principals should make personnel evaluation a high priority. They should read the literature, visit with their staff, and spend more time dealing with evaluation. A basic position should be that every staff member is evaluated every year.

  This will require that the principal explain the evaluation process, spend time in the classrooms of his school, and solicit help from others. Evaluation should include peers in the process. What is important is that boards expect principals to evaluate well and that they assume this as a major responsibility. One can do it well, however, only if he is an expert in the field.

- Think in terms of results and not in terms of activities.

  The trend today is to think in terms of results and not activities. People are more interested in tests than in what activities are conducted in schools. In reporting to parents, principals should stress the following:

  1. Achievement on state and national tests. Especially important are scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the American College Testing program.
  2. Attendance levels of both students and teachers.
  3. Placement of students in jobs.
  4. Success of students in colleges and universities.
  5. Number of national merit scholars.
  6. Number of scholarships obtained by students.
  7. Grade-point average of athletes.

8. Reduction in drop-out rates.

9. Contests won by students in all areas: athletic, academic, vocational.

We are rapidly moving away from being happy in school to achieving something which can be translated to a score or number. What are the results (or output measures) is what the public wants to know and not how many are having a good time.

- Create partnerships with the greater community.

Effective principals have learned an important lesson - they need all the help they can get from whomever will give it. Today schools cannot survive without the support of citizens, other than parents. Only about 25% of our population has children in public schools. The demographics alone show that we need to build bridges to other segments of the community.

We need to work with the private sector, business leaders, chambers of commerce, older citizens, singles, and young parents with pre-school children. We need volunteers, technical assistance, fund-raising personnel, and human help in a variety of ways.

As people become involved in schools, and help with decision-making, they understand schools and become supportive of what principals and teachers do. Walking one day in their shoes builds appreciation for complex and extremely difficult work.

- Control your time, your priorities, and your goals.

Time is the most valuable commodity each of us has. It is the same for everyone - each has twenty-four hours in each day. How we use that time is largely determined by the individual himself.

Some people have the ability to use time wisely. Others waste excessive amounts of time. The difference is because of what individuals believe about time and about themselves. Most people can have greater control if they do not feel that they are at the mercy of the forces around them. One can control time if he feels that he can. Personal feelings of being in control assists one to manage time and to use it more wisely.

Further, individuals waste time complaining about not having time. If they would attack the assignment, time would be saved and the job would be accomplished. The control of time is really a matter of personal control.

- Develop a new loyalty to public education.

It is fashionable today for many to be critical of public schools and to indicate that working in schools is extremely difficult.

Even more damaging is the position that one would not enter education if he had to do it all over again.

What we need today is a new loyalty to public schools, especially from those who work in them. Public education is the backbone of a free, democratic, economically successful society. Schools are the foundation for personal growth, economic sufficiency, and good citizenship. Those of us who work in public education should be proud to do so. We should be the exemplars for young people to want to enter the profession.

Loyalty is needed at every level - teachers, administrators, board members. Public education has done much for us and our nation. We need to do something in return to protect and preserve our schools.

Conclusion.

Educational reform is a reality of the 1980's. The effort to improve our schools will not diminish. If anything, it will continue to intensify. Central to school reform is the changing role of the principal. The position is rapidly evolving as a more important and more influential school job. When the discussions conclude, the principal will emerge as the primary agent for effective schools.

To those who are currently in the principalship and to those who aspire to be principals, the message is clear - understand the forces and pressures which surround the principal, work hard to shape the direction of these forces, and develop personal strategies to enhance your position.

The time is now. The place is your local school. The leadership is the school principal. It's a lot more fun than retirement.